In the Pages of *Ms.*: Sex Role Portrayals of Women in Advertising

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The stated advertising policy of **Ms.** *magazine precludes the acceptance of advertisements for products that are "harmful" or advertisements that are insulting to women. This study employs manifest and latent content analysis to assess the extent to which* **Ms.** *advertising, over the first 15 full years of its publication has carried out this policy. The findings suggest that a substantial proportion of* **Ms.** *advertising promotes products generally considered "harmful." Also, while the portrayal of women as subordinate to men or as merely decorative has decreased over time,* **Ms.** *advertising has increasingly portrayed women as alluring sex objects. Possible reasons for the trends revealed here are discussed.*

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We're not the Ms. we used to be."
(*Ms.* advertising campaign tag line, 1988)

The resurgence of the women's movement in the 1960s called attention to the portrayals of women in the mass media (Rakow 1985). Of particular concern, and focus of criticism, were the portrayals of women in advertising. Feminist criticism of advertising content most often centered on the following issues: portrayals which were unrealistic and limited; depictions of women as sex objects, "happy housewives," or incompetents; themes of women's dependence upon men; and underrepresentaton of working women (Waason 1973; Courtney and Whipple 1983).

That advertising should be a target of such criticism is hardly surprising. As a highly visible and powerful social institution, its role as a vehicle of cultural communication has long been recognized (Pease 1958; Potter 1954). Given the power of advertising thus to create and transmit cultural meaning, the presence of stereotypes which are inaccurate, offensive, and confining is particularly troubling. Such stereotypes provide a limited "vocabulary of interaction," encouraging people to think and speak of women primarily in terms of their relationship to men, family, or their sexuality (Tuchman 1979).

Background

The study reported here is an investigation of the portrayals of women in the advertising pages of *Ms.* magazine during its first fifteen full years of publication, 1973-1987. Calling itself the "magazine of record for women," *Ms.* espouses a strict policy regarding sexist advertising as well as advertising for harmful products. In doing so, it has established itself as an institutional prototype for the appropriate conduct of advertising to women.

The Emergence of Ms. Magazine

The first official issue of *Ms.* appeared in July 1972. The magazine was intended to be a forum for feminist political debate, to give "direct voice to basic feminist

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issues in an undiluted manner" (Wasson 1973). More important for the discussion here, was the publication's stance regarding advertising. A very real concern about the power of advertising, both as a social and as an economic institution, seemed to be at the very core of the magazine's emergence.

The goals of the publication at that time were: (1) to maintain editorial control, (2) to maintain a fair and aesthetic proportion of advertising to editorial content, (3) to present advertising that accurately reflects the way women spend their hard-earned dollars, (4) to present advertising that treats women as people, and (5) to train advertising salespeople who themselves would be agents of change ("Personal Report from *Ms.*" 1974). These goals were consistent with the magazine's stated advertising policy:

> Obviously, *Ms.* won't solicit or accept ads, whatever the product they're presenting, that are downright insulting to women. Nor will we accept product categories that might be harmful ("Personal Report from *Ms.*" 1972).

Ms.'s advertising representatives were the first to solicit advertisements for a woman's magazine from advertisers who, at that time, were more likely to be found in male-oriented business, news, or general magazines—cars, stereos, and financial services. Advertising from personal care and more traditionally "feminine" categories was not sought because the publication " '. . . didn't want to have to supply complementary copy and traditional female products wouldn't come without it' " (Steinem in Uihlein 1982).

Ms. proclaimed its advertising efforts to be a success. In 1974, the staff wrote that " . . . more and more, we are also serving as a laboratory of change. Advertisers who want to serve women are beginning to be more sensitive to the images they present" ("Personal Report From *Ms.*" 1974). *Ms.* became an icon of the feminist movement; and although the magazine was credited with spawning a whole new category of women's magazines (Emmrich 1982), ten years after its origination *Ms.* remained the only national, high circulation feminist magazine (Miller 1981). However, advertising pages began to drop in 1985 (*Advertising Age*), and in 1986, the magazine's representatives started soliciting hair care, makeup and fragrance ads to benefit the "whole" feminist woman.

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Critics have not looked favorably upon changes in the magazine, suggesting that *Ms.*'s once powerful message is "being weakened by advertising that features idealized images of women, a lack of minorities, [as well as a lack of] older, nonperfect women" (English 1983). More recent attacks have cited *Ms.* for violation of its policy regarding unhealthy products. As one critic noted, "One expects more of the country's most influential feminist magazine" (Milligan 1986).

Literature Review

This study should be interpreted in the context of a larger stream of research on advertising portrayals of women which arose out of concerns voiced by the women's movement. These studies have approached the topic from a number of perspectives, including: content analyses of television commercials (Dominick and Rauch 1972; Silverstein and Silverstein 1974; McArthur and Resko 1975); critical essays (Cowie, 1977; Janus 1977; Tuchman 1978, 1979); content analyses of advertising in specialized fields such as medicine (Prather and Fidell 1975) and pharmaceuticals (McKee, Corder, and Taizlip 1974; Mosher 1976); and studies of the psychological and behavioral influence of stereotypic role portrayals (Wortzell and Frisbie 1974; Baker and Churchill, Jr. 1977; Chestnut, LaChance, and Lubitz 1977; Duker and Tucker 1977; Kelly, Solomon, and Burke 1977; Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia 1977; Slate and Weinberger 1980; Reid and Soley 1981, 1983; Rossi and Rossi 1985; Leigh, Rethans, and Whitney 1987). Much of this research has been extensively summarized elsewhere (see, e.g., Courtney and Whipple 1983; Kerin et al. 1979).

Particularly relevant to this investigation are a number of content analyses which have been conducted on the portrayal of women in magazines. Most often, these investigations have been "image studies," drawing conclusions based upon denotative elements within the advertisements, counting the number of women shown in ads and the quality of those images. (Courtney and Lockeretz 1971; Wagner and Banos 1973; Sexton and Haberman 1974; Venkatesan and Losco 1975; Belkaoui and Belkaoui 1976; Soley and Reid 1988; see also McKee, Corder, and Taizlip 1974; Prather and Fidell 1975; Mosher 1976). Although minor variations over time are reported, results of these analyses have repeatedly documented the existence of a number of stereotypes which feminist critics have identified as objectionable (N.O.W. in Wasson 1973). These include, among others: the portrayal of women in a limited number of social roles, as evidenced by the underrepresentation of women in working roles and the persistence of the traditional "happy housewife" and "keep her in her place" stereotypes; the portrayal of women as "sex object" or in decorative roles in relation to the product; and the portrayal of women as dependent on men. (See Courtney and Whipple 1983 for an extensive review of the findings of these investigations.)

Outside the discipline of advertising, "image research" has come under considerable criticism. This criticism, originating particularly with feminist scholars (Cowie 1977; Janus 1977; Tuchman 1978, 1979), suggests that sexism exists in a web of cultural meaning, and as such, cannot be "read off" images (see also, Leiss, et al. 1986; Jhally 1987; McCracken 1988).

A very real concern about the power of advertising . . . seemed to be at the very core of the magazine's emergence.

Efforts to move beyond the mere counting of denotative elements have been limited, and for the most part, have been conducted outside the discipline of advertising (Williamson 1978; Goffman 1979). Within the discipline of advertising, few studies have incorporated connotative dimensions (Sexton and Haberman 1974; Pingree, et al. 1976). Pingree et al.'s (1976) application of a "levels of consciousness" Scale of Sexism (Butler-Paisley and Paisley-Butler 1974), an attempt to tap the latent content of magazine advertising empirically, is unique in the field. Pingree et al. (1976) suggested that the scale provided an ordinal measure of *how much* sexism existed in any media depiction and concluded that the scale was a reliable measure for objectifying amounts of sexism. The results of their investigation corroborated studies of manifest content, documenting persistent stereotypic images of women in advertising.

Ms.: A "Best Case Scenario"

The study reported here examines advertising content in what might be considered for research purposes an "ideal" editorial/advertising environment—*Ms.*, a feminist publication with a stated policy regarding sexist advertising. Given this policy, *Ms.* can be seen as a "best-case scenario" of non-sexist role portrayal. If sexist advertising is discovered in the pages of *Ms.*, it is reasonable to assume that sexist role portrayals are equally, or perhaps more pervasive in other media vehicles. Inasmuch as the publication sets itself up as a prototype of "what advertising to women should be," investigation of its advertising content provides unique insight into the problem of sexism in advertising more generally.

The Research Approach

This study also makes a methodological contribution. As noted earlier, "image research," despite its popularity as a research approach to the study of portrayals of women in advertising, has been sharply criticized, particularly by feminist scholars. These scholars suggest that "sexism" in an image cannot be designated as a content variable in the way that other denotative elements can. One writer noted:

> It is in the development of new or different definitions and understandings of what men and women are and their roles in society which produces readings of images as sexist . . . an image itself might be "innocuous" but its point and mode of presentation produces its reading as sexist. (Cowie 1977, p. 20).

Thus, to suggest that meaning lies in objective content camouflages the institutional depth of sexism in culture and society. "Sexist stereotypes," McCracken (1988) noted, "are thoroughly grounded in even the subtlest details of everyday life."

Alternatively, these researchers suggest the adoption of more interpretive methods of analysis. For example, Williamson (1978), in her book *Decoding Advertisements*, undertook a critical analysis using structuralism and semiotics. Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* (1979) used "frame analysis" to assess shared social codes about gender in visual images of advertising and photography.

Recognizing the value of "image research," while also acknowledging its shortcomings, this study uses traditional measures of manifest content to derive denotative meaning, as well as interpretive measures designed to tap latent content of advertising messages. (See Babbie [1986] for a discussion of manifest and latent content).

The Research Question

In their review of the literature, *Sex Stereotyping in Advertising*, Courtney and Whipple (1983) suggest:

> There is mounting evidence that sex stereotyping in advertising does play a role in reflecting societal ills and helping to sustain them. There is also mounting evidence, however, that more responsible advertising could play a positive and beneficial role in helping to change them.

Clearly, this places a heavy burden of responsibility upon the advertising industry. Because *Ms.* magazine has a stated policy rejecting all sexist advertising, as well as any advertising for products which might be harmful, it is valuable to address the issue of how well *Ms.* has adhered to its stated policy since its inception. Assuming that past advertising research has established the consensual validity of manifest and latent content measures employed in this study, the specific research question posed is:

> What empirical evidence exists to suggest that the portrayal of women throughout the history of *Ms.* magazine has been consistent with its stated advertising policy?

In order to examine this question, we assess advertising content over time. Because role portrayals have been found to vary across product category (Sexton and Haberman 1974), we also explicitly examine the functional relationship between role portrayals and product classifications.

Method

The Instrument. The instruments utilized are drawn from Sexton and Haberman (1974) and Pingree, et al. (1976). The Sexton and Haberman rating system included traditional measures of manifest content such as number and gender of adults, presence of children, ad composition, environment, role, and manifest relation of woman to others in the ad (interpersonal context). In addition, Sexton and Haberman (1974) employed a number of latent content measures. These included: relation of woman to the product, appearance, and traditional v. nontraditional depiction (see Figure 1 for clarification).

The Scale of Sexism ("level of consciousness scale") employed by Pingree, et al. (1976) is outlined in Figure 2. It classifies media portrayals of women into five conceptually-driven categories which are believed to possess an ordinal relationship to each other. As such, it allows the "meaning" of an image to reside in the interpretation of that image rather than in some objective measure of content elements.

Instrument Reliability

Two female coders were trained to recognize the operational definitions of the manifest and latent content variables. In a recent study of commercial content, Wilkes and Valencia (1989) noted that ethnicity or race of coders may be a significant factor biasing their observations. These findings, seen in light of Bruner's (1957) earlier work, suggest that when feasible, coders should be members of the medium's natural audience. Given that almost 90 percent of the readers of *Ms.* are female adults (SMRB 1988), the use of female coders seemed appropriate in this study. It is reasonable to assume, however, that had one of the coders been male, reliability may have been somewhat lower than that reported below.

A pilot test was conducted in which 21 advertisements were coded. The pi index of reliability (Scott 1955) was calculated for each latent variable (See Figures 1 and 2), as well as for each of the following manifest content variables: product category, manifest sex role (e.g., housewife, social companion/date), and interpersonal context (e.g., social, business, woman alone). The two female coders achieved a 100 pi index (i.e., all answers agreed) on all items except for the "Alluring Appearance" variable and the Scale of Sexism. These, respectively, received a pi value of 64 and 88. The 88 pi index was acceptable, considering the complex conceptualizations of each scale level on the Scale

FIGURE 1
Sexton and Haberman's (1974)
Latent Content Variables Coded in Study*

Relation of Women to Product
- Participating in the product's use (functional)
- Decorative (no functional relation to the product)
- Other

Appearance
- Obviously Alluring
  (following pilot test, defined as "the model's body or face is being used to entice or tempt the viewer/reader of the ad into liking or using the product")
- Other

Traditional/Nontraditional
- The situation in which the woman appears would be considered by society as traditional/nontraditional for a woman.

*Not considered to be mutually exclusive classifications across variables (i.e., role portrayal is classified on all three variables)

FIGURE 2
Pingree, et al.'s (1976) "Scale of Sexism" Dimensions Coded in Study*

LEVEL 1	Put her down and belittle her. Dumb blonde, sex object, victim. Focus on her body. She lets other think for her.
LEVEL 2	Keep her in her place. Woman shown in romantic situation. Traditional role of wife, mother, secretary, nurse. Unwomanly traits—a woman shown as a doctor, engineer, etc., seems to be doing something beyond her capabilities.
LEVEL 3	Woman in two places. May be a lawyer, but must still have dinner on the table. Career is something extra, after housework.
LEVEL 4	She is fully equal. Woman treated as a professional. Not necessary to mention home or mothering. Men can do housework as well as the woman.
LEVEL 5	Nonstereotypic. Women shown as superior to men in some cases, inferior in others. People not judged by their sex. Women may behave in a traditionally masculine way; men may behave in a traditionally feminine way.

*Role portrayal classified on only one level of ordinal scale, although levels were regrouped in some analyses.

For a complete discussion of these conceptualizations see Butler-Paisley and Paisley-Butler 1974; Pingree, et al. 1976.

of Sexism. However, the "Alluring" classification was judged to require further clarification. As such, "Alluring" was more precisely conceptualized as meaning that "the model's body or face is being used to entice or tempt the viewer/reader of the ad into liking or using the product." After this clarification, a pi score of 100 was obtained for this item when fifteen more advertisements were tested.

Procedure. A total of 628 ads from *Ms.* magazine was selected for coding on the manifest and latent content variables just discussed. Three magazines per year for alternate years between 1973 and 1987 were randomly selected for observation. The random selection of issues was intended to control for any seasonal variations in advertising content. Within the issues selected, all advertisements which were a full page or larger were coded. The total sample yielded 321 advertisements containing a visualization of one or more women. In those instances where more than one woman appeared in an ad, only one of them was randomly selected for observation.

Following the completion of the coding task, the advertisements were classified by product category of the sponsor and by time period in the history of the magazine. Three broad product classes were defined, and the time periods were grouped into approximately five-year segments: Early (1973-1977), Middle (1978-1982), and Recent (1983-1987). Note that the first official issue of *Ms.* appeared in July 1972, making 1973 the first full year of publication.

Chi-square analyses were applied to the data in order to examine whether or not observed frequencies of the various manifest and latent content categories are related to product class and time period. In addition, frequency distributions of product and content variables were analyzed individually, independent of the time dimension.

Results

Initially, it is valuable to consider the types of products that have been advertised in *Ms.* over the history of the magazine. Since *Ms.* is generally recognized as the first women's magazine to solicit advertising for non-traditional products and services (Uihlein 1982); and because its stated philosophy precludes the advertising of "harmful" products, it is relevant to assess empirically the extent to which these objectives have been achieved. In rank order, the top ten product categories in terms of frequency of sponsorship in the total sample (n = 628) are:

1) alcoholic beverages (15.9 percent)
2) cigarettes (13.7 percent)
3) entertainment (11.5 percent)
4) automobiles (8.6 percent)
5) feminine hygiene (5.1 percent)
6) non-profit groups (4.6 percent)
7) facial cosmetics (3.5 percent)
8) institutional ads (3.2 percent)
9) clothing (3.0 percent)
10) medicine (3.0 percent)

Alcohol and cigarette advertisements combined account for approximately 30 percent of the advertisements observed. Due to legal constraints, cigarettes, and some alcoholic beverages are traditionally heavy users of magazine vehicles, and *Ms.*'s distribution of advertising in these categories is not likely to be atypical. Note that the fourth largest product category is automobiles. That category has received considerable criticism for its approach to the female market segment in the past (Steinberg 1986), but more recently has been working closely with magazines to reach that market.

After initial ranking of individual products, they were grouped into three broad classes: Personal Appearance (e.g., cosmetics, clothing, jewelry); Business, Travel, and Transportation (e.g, insurance, stock investments, airlines, locations); and Home Products and Leisure Items (e.g., beverages, cigarettes, household goods, children's products). Table 1 contains a cross-tabulation of the frequency of these three broad product classes over the three time periods used in this study. Note that the Home Products class is the largest overall, accounting for 53 percent of the total number of ads observed. Of the 628 advertisements in the sample, only 20 percent are in the Personal Appearance category; however, this product class exhibits a positive absolute and proportionate trend, as a function of time period (chi-square = 27.5, df = 4, $p < .001$). The largest proportion of the Business, Travel, and Transportation class of products was in the early period, while the largest proportion of the Home Products class occurred in the middle time period of the magazine's history.

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Manifest Content of Ads Portraying Women

Table 2 examines the relationship between general product category and classification of women in terms of the manifest interpersonal "sex" roles: housewife/mother, social companion/date, employee/consumer, and model/other. The portrayal of these roles varies significantly across product class (chi-square = 86.2, df = 6, $p < .001$). For Personal Appearance products, note that the modal sex-role is model/other; while for the Business, Travel and Transportation category, women are most frequently portrayed in the employee/consumer role. The Home Products class approximates a bimodal distribution of sex-roles, with 30 percent of the women appearing in these ads as social companion/date, and 38 percent portrayed as model/other. This pattern suggests that the sponsors of advertisements appearing in *Ms.* tend to portray women in a sex role that is

TABLE 1
Contingency Table Analysis of Ms. Magazine
Advertising Grouped by Time Period and Product Category

Total Count Row Percentages	Products: Personal Appearance	Products: Business, Travel & Transportation	Products: Home Products	Time Period Totals
Time Periods				
Early	16	55	89	160
	10%	34%	56%	25%
Middle	29	40	107	176
	16%	23%	61%	28%
Recent	82	72	138	292
	28%	25%	47%	47%
Product Totals	127	167	334	628
	20%	27%	53%	100%

Chi square = 27.5, df = 4, $p < .001$

TABLE 2
Contingency Table Analysis of
Manifest Sex Roles in Ms. Advertising by Product Category*

Total Count Row Percentages	Manifest Sex Roles: Housewife/ Mother	Social Companion/Date	Employee/ Consumer	Model/ Others	Product Category Totals
Product Category					
Personal	0	9	18	63	90
Appearance	0%	10%	20%	70%	28%
Business, Travel	13	11	43	10	77
& Transportation	17%	14%	56%	13%	24%
Home Products	17	47	32	58	154
	11%	30%	21%	38%	48%
Sex-Role Totals	30	67	93	131	321
	9%	21%	29%	41%	100%

Chi-square = 86.2, df = 6, $p < .001$
*Percentages based on 321 ads in the sample that involved women.

consistent with (or relevant to) the product type. This sex role/product congruency is a pattern that some researchers (e.g., Wortzel and Frisbie 1974) have found women to prefer. A chi-square analysis relating manifest sex role portrayal to time period did not exhibit statistical significance.

A related manifest content dimension examines the context of interpersonal relationships depicted in the advertisements. This "relationship to others" variable was coded into the following typology: family context, social context, business context, impersonal context, nobody else (woman alone). Again, significant relationships were observed when this variable was crosstabulated with product class (chi-square = 76.5, df = 8, $p < .001$).

Table 3 indicates that the modal category for all three product classes is the "nobody else (woman alone)" context. This category is, however, disproportionately large for the Personal Appearance class, and disproportionately small for the Business, Travel, and Transportation class. Note that of the 321 ads featuring at least one woman, over half (52 percent) portrayed the woman alone. In Table 3, it an also be seen that a disproportionate number of ads depicting a business context was observed for Business, Travel, and Transportation products, and that a "greater-than-expected" frequency of Home Products ads portrayed a social relationship to others. Again, this significant pattern suggests a consistency between product category and the interpersonal context featured in the ads. However, no comparable significant pattern was observed when the "relationship to others" variable was crosstabulated with the three time periods.

Latent Content of Ads Portraying Women

Now we turn to analyses of the advertising content dimensions that may be considered "latent," requiring not only observation, but also *interpretation* of the woman's role. That is, latent content categories require assessment of the *connotative* meaning of the role portrayal.

Figure 3 graphically plots percentage data for three latent content dimensions drawn from the Sexton and Haberman (1974) study within each of three broadly-defined product classes (described in a previous section). These latent measures are: (1) a "Decorative" rather than functional role of the woman in relation to the product; (2) a "Traditional Appearance," being judged in terms of societal norms; and (3) an "Alluring Appearance" of the woman, interpreted as enticing the consumer into liking or using the product.

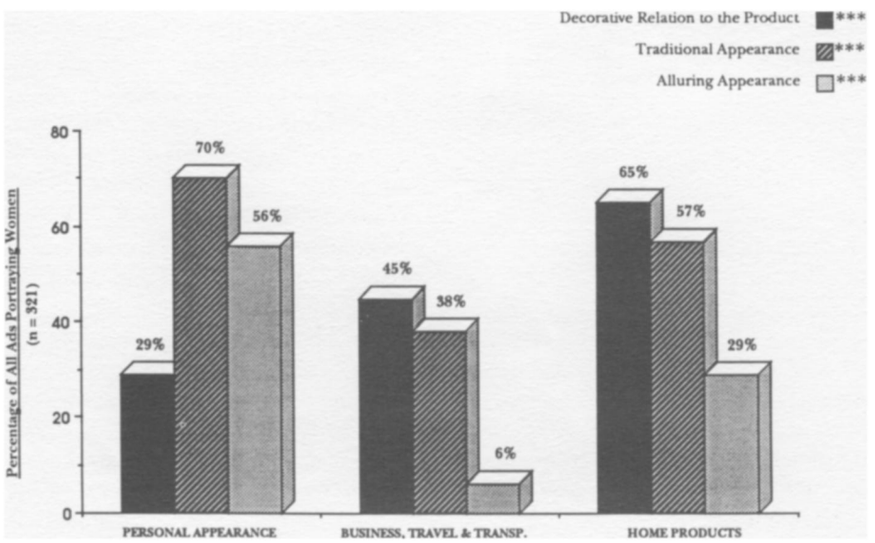
When chi-square analyses are applied to crosstabulations of the latent content categories with the three product classes, it is clear from the statistically significant patterns evident in Figure 3 that the incidence of all three latent measures are related to the product classification. The "Decorative" role portrayal was observed most often in Home Products ads, and least often in Personal Appearance ads (65 v. 29 percent) (chi-square = 30.61, df = 2, $p < .001$). In contrast, the "Traditional" role occurred most frequently in

TABLE 3
Contingency Table Analysis of Women's Relationship to Other People in the Ad by Product Category*

Total Count / Row Percentages	Relationship to Others					Product Category Totals
	Family	*Social*	*Business*	*Impersonal*	*Nobody Else*	
Product Category						
Personal Appearance	0 0%	12 13%	0 0%	12 13%	66 73%	90 28%
Business, Travel & Transportation	12 16%	14 18%	16 21%	7 9%	28 36%	77 24%
Home Products	11 7%	52 34%	3 2%	14 9%	74 48%	154 48%
Relationship to Others Totals	23 8%	78 24%	19 6%	33 10%	168 52%	321 100%

Chi-square = 76.5, df = 8, $p < .001$
*Based only on the 321 ads containing women

FIGURE 3
Latent Advertising Content in *Ms.* Magazine for Three Product Classes (Sexton and Haberman 1974)*



*Because content categories are not mutually exclusive, percentage totals within each product category do not add up to 100%.
***χ^2 significant at $p < .001$ (df = 2)

advertisements for Personal Appearance products (70 percent) and least frequently (38 percent) for Business, Travel, and Transportation products (chi-square = 18.01, df = 2, $p < .001$). Perhaps not surprisingly, an "Alluring" appearance was also most frequently observed in ads for Personal Appearance products (56 percent), but occurred in only 6 percent of the ads for Business, Travel, and Transportation products (chi-square = 51.80, df = 2, $p < .001$).

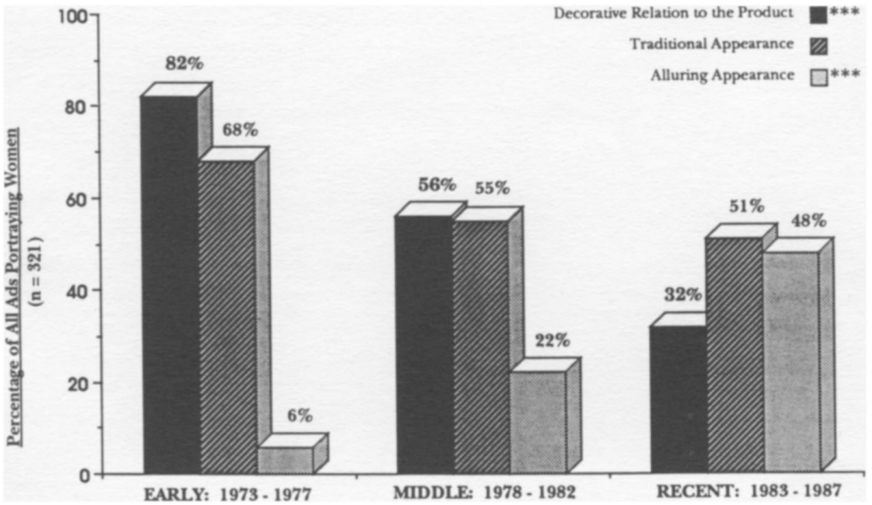
Figure 4 summarizes chi-square analyses of the same latent content categories over the three time periods of the magazine's history. Note the significant decrease in the "Decorative" role portrayal over the three time periods (chi-square = 48.26, df = 2, $p < .001$). In the early years, 82 percent of the role portrayals were "Decorative." The analogous proportion was only 32 percent in the most recent period. The incidence of "Traditional" role portrayals did not exhibit a statistically significant negative trend. In contrast to the decline in decorative role portrayals, the incidence of "Alluring" images increased significantly over time (chi-square = 45.54, df = 2, $p < .001$).

Three additional latent content dimensions are derived from the ordinal scale of Sexism used by Pingree, et al. (1976) (see Figure 2). Level 1 (portrayal as a "Sex Object"), and Level 2 ("Keep Her in Her Place") were considered respectively to characterize high and moderate levels of sexism. The final latent content dimension reported here (considered lowest in sexist role portrayal) combines Levels 3 through 5 of the Scale of Sexism. This last dimension, thus, includes portrayals featuring women in multiple roles at once; as fully equal professionals; or in a completely nonstereotypic role.

Considering this regrouping of the Scale of Sexism measures, note in Table 4 that portrayal of the woman as "Sex Object" (High Sexism) exhibited a pattern consistent with the "Traditional" and "Alluring" dimensions discussed earlier: the Personal Appearance category had the highest proportion of advertisements containing "Sex Object"

FIGURE 4
Latent Advertising Content in *Ms.* Magazine
for Three Time Periods (Sexton and Haberman 1974)*

Time Period in History of Magazine



*Because content categories are not mutually exclusive, percentage totals within each product category do not add up to 100%.
***χ^2 significant at $p < .001$ (df = 2)

TABLE 4
Contigency Table Analysis of
Level of Sexism in *Ms.* Advertising and Product Category*

Total Count / *Row Percentages*	*Level of Sexism*** *Low*	*Moderate*	*High*	*Products Totals*
Product Category				
Personal	30	13	47	90
Appearance	33%	14%	52%	28%
Business, Travel	54	20	3	77
& Transportation	70%	26%	4%	24%
Home Products	69	47	38	154
	45%	30%	25%	48%
Sexism Level	153	80	88	321
Totals	48%	25%	27%	100%

Chi square = 56.46, df = 4, P < .001
*Percentages based on 321 ads in the sample that involved women.
**Low = Levels 3, 4, and 5 on "Scale of Sexism"
Moderate = Level 2 on "Scale of Sexism"
High = Level 1 on "Scale of Sexism

role portrayals (52 percent) and the Business, Travel, and Transportation category had the lowest (4 percent). A somewhat different pattern was observed for the moderate dimension of sexism, "Keep Her in Her Place," in the sense that the frequency of this role portrayal was greatest in Home Products ads and occurred least often in Personal Appearance product ads (30 v. 14 percent). It should be noted also in Table 4 that the Business, Travel, and Transportation category was associated with the highest proportion (70 percent) of role portrayals in the lowest level of sexism (as regrouped). A chi-square analysis of the Table 4 data indicates that these patterns are statistically significant (chi-square = 56.46, df = 4, $p < .001$).

Turning to Table 5, it is clear that the proportion of advertisements representing the highest level of sexism ("Sex Object") increased during *Ms.*'s publication history (15 to 38 percent) between the Early and Recent years of publication. Note that this pattern in Table 5 is consistent with the previously noted increases in the incidence of "Alluring" portrayals over time.

The incidence of Level 2 of the Scale of Sexism (Moderate), however, declined over time. In the period of 1973-1977, 46 percent of the ads portrayed the "Keep Her in Her Place" role. This percentage had declined to only 13 percent in the most recent time period. When one considers Levels 3, 4, and 5 together as "Low Sexism" role portrayal, the pattern over time does not change as markedly. Note that the early years (1973-1977) represented the lowest proportion (39 percent) of "low sexist" role portrayal of the three time periods. Due to the proportionate decrease in the "Keep Her in Her Place" role portrayal, and the corresponding increase observed in the "Sex Object" role portrayal, level of sexism was observed to vary significantly over time (chi-square = 36.22, df = 4, $p < .001$).

Discussion

Consistency with Policy? This study empirically supports the argument that,

TABLE 5
Contingency Table Analysis of
Level of Sexism in *Ms.* Advertising and Time Period*

Total Count / *Row Percentages*	*Level of Sexism***			*Time Periods*
	Low	*Moderate*	*High*	*Totals*
Time Period***				
Early	27	32	10	69
	39%	46%	15%	21%
Middle	52	29	21	102
	51%	28%	21%	32%
Recent	74	19	57	150
	49%	13%	38%	47%
Sexism Level	153	80	88	321
Totals	48%	25%	27%	100%

Chi square = 36.22, df = 4, $p < .001$
*Percentages based on 321 ads in the sample that contained women.
**Low = Levels 3, 4, and 5 on "Scale of Sexism"
Moderate = Level 2 on "Scale of Sexism"
High = Level 1 on "Scale of Sexism"
***Early = 1973-1977
Middle = 1978-1982
Recent = 1983-1987

at least in some respects, advertising practice at *Ms.* magazine has been inconsistent with its stated advertising policy regarding harmful product and sexist advertising content. It is clear from the results shown here that nearly one-third of all advertisements in the sample promote products generally perceived to be "harmful." Perhaps more important to this study is the finding that even with an *explicit commitment* to nonstereotypic portrayals of women, substantial levels of "sexism" are, nevertheless, evident in *Ms.* magazine's advertising content. For example, Level 1 ("Sex Object"), conceptualized as the "most sexist" portrayal on the Scale of Sexism, increased dramatically over *Ms.*'s fifteen-year publication history. The portrayal of women as "Alluring" demonstrated an even greater increase.

Modal levels of "sexism" differed across product categories. This lack of uniformity was evident in measures of both manifest and latent content. In general, advertisements for Business, Travel, and Transportation products contained fewer "sexist" role portrayals than did those for Home Products or those in the Personal Appearance category. This phenomenon may, in part, be explained by the management concept of "sex-role/product congruency." That is to say, for certain products which are "sexually relevant" (e.g., perfume, cosmetics), the association of the product with sexually-oriented role portrayals may be seen to be appropriate and effective.

From a management perspective, striving for such congruency appears intuitively sound. However, it may in fact diminish an advertisement's effectiveness in communicating with the target audience (and in extreme cases may even alienate that audience) insofar as the specific role portrayals are perceived to be negative or inappropriate (Bartos 1982, Doyle 1988). Alternatively, role portrayals that were once perceived to be inappropriate may become acceptable over time. This suggests the need for constant management re-evaluation of message content.

Sexism: A Changing Construct. One premise of this paper was the assumption that the measures used can be reliably coded and are consensually valid. While strong evidence was presented regarding reliability, the results of the study do raise several questions regarding the ability of the measures to truly capture all the nuances of the dynamic "sexism" construct. Certainly it is clear that simply counting manifest content elements in an advertisement fails to tap the subtlety and complexity of "sexism." This argues strongly for the inclusion of interpretive measures of latent content such as those employed here.

Insomuch as stereotypes derive meaning from the culture, advertisers who rely upon stereotypic role portrayals, and researchers who attempt to evaluate those portrayals must be particularly cognizant of cultural change as it might impact the interpretation of meaning.

In defense of *Ms.*, it is possible that the very nature of what is considered to be "sexist" has changed over time, and that even the latent content measures used here were unable to reflect that change. One might suggest, for example, that the construct of "Sex Object," once seen to be unidimensional and negative may now have assumed a number of dimensions. Further, in light of increased interest in fitness and health, greater acceptance of intimacy in persuasive appeals, and greater tolerance of nudity, one can no longer assume that negative stereotypes characterize advertisements which simply "focus on the body." And in fact, such advertisements may now be seen to be quite positive. This also raises some question as to the validity of the assumption that Level 1 is, in fact, the "most sexist" of the levels.

Similar questions might be raised about other scale positions as well. For example, it could be argued that Level 2 ("Keep Her in Her Place") is really the most potentially damaging "sexist" dimension because of its subtlety. In light of our criticism, it should be noted that the magazine exhibited a substantial decrease over time in "sexism" on this Level 2 dimension. Finally, recent criticism of the early feminist ideal of the "superwoman" (Tuchman 1979, Doyle 1988) calls into question the assumption that Level 3 ("Multiple

Roles") remains unambiguously "nonsexist" in its connotation today.

The use of latent as well as manifest content measures in this study provided insights into the complexity of the concept of "sexism," insights that would not have been apparent from an examination of manifest content alone. In light of these insights, researchers in this area would do well to consider the adoption of still other methodologies (perhaps drawn from other disciplines such as interpretive sociology, cultural anthropology, and rhetorical criticism) in their efforts to further understand the nature of "sexist" role portrayals. Such methods should consider the relationship of stereotypes to the legitimation of social power, and should address both the descriptive and evaluative aspects of those stereotypes as well as their grounding in the social structure.

It should be noted that even using both manifest and latent content measures, any content analysis is inherently descriptive and can provide only limited insight into *why* significant relationships or trends are observed (Kassarjian 1977). In this particular study, as has just been discussed, possible explanations for findings may be found in the changing social milieu. Another possible avenue of inquiry might explore economic influences. A rigorous economic analysis would require substantial data at both the organization and industry levels (see, e.g., Norris 1982; 1984). While such an analysis is beyond the scope of this study, the following section provides a framework which might be a useful starting point for future economic investigations.

Ms.: Market Pressures. Melody (1973) has suggested a model in which advertisers are seen to "buy" media audiences, thus making media content the means to bring advertisers and audiences together. This implies that our entire media system may be " . . . fundamentally responsive to the advertiser." In fact, Melody suggests that in weighing audience needs against advertiser needs, media will give priority to the advertiser. Specialized media, within this model, tend to be successful only insofar as they are able to lure an audience segment sought by advertisers.

Clearly Ms. emerged as a specialized publication, a publication with a mission, a publication that gave priority to its audience. This is not to suggest, however, that Ms. was unaware of economic realities. It realized that in order to survive, it had to make advertisers as well as readers happy. In its first official issue, in fact, Ms. told its readers: "We'll do our best to make Ms. a laboratory that is useful to the advertiser and to you" ("Personal Report from Ms. " 1972).

Recently, new rival magazines such as *Working Woman* and *Savvy*, and editorial changes in established women's magazines such as *Glamour* and *Good Housekeeping*, have increased competition for this specialized audience segment. Within this context, Ms. has changed its "look," its editorial/advertising content, and the way it describes its audience to potential advertisers. The new look of Ms., complete with redesigned cover, cleaner typefaces, European page size, and modernized logo, has been accompanied by noticeable changes in editorial content. Once filled with "urgent calls to the barricades," more recent fare resembles that found in traditional women's magazines. In defense of these editorial changes, Ms.'s new editor, Anne Summers, explained, "The Women's Movement is not as militant as it used to be. The world has changed and we've changed too . . . We are still a feminist magazine, but we are aware that our readers have other interests than politics" (quoted in Zuckerman 1988; Toth 1989).

Using Melody's model as a source of explanation, one would suggest that the changes observed in Ms. indicate that the publication now places greater emphasis on the "bottom line" than on its original feminist agenda; that is to say, it has become advertiser rather than audience driven. This would seem to be a particularly viable explanation to account for the incidence of "harmful" products advertising.

Alternately, looking at the question of "sexist" advertising content, it might be suggested that Ms. is in fact responding to what it perceives to be changes in the needs, interests, and/or composition of its audience. This certainly is a more benevolent interpretation of changes which have occurred at Ms. than would be suggested by Melody's (1973) model.

Regardless of which interpretation is the more valid, Ms. has an explicit policy which precludes the advertising of "harmful" products or the use of "sexist" role portrayals in advertising content. More advertising need not, in any case, necessarily translate into more "sexist" advertising unless clearance policies have been relaxed, or advertising in general has become more "sexist." The fact of the matter remains, paraphrasing Ms.'s own words, "It's Not the Ms. it used to be."

Note: Citing lack of advertiser support, Ms. suspended publication with the November 1989 issue. It was suggested that the magazine would reappear in January 1990 in a different format and without advertising; however, at press time the publication had not yet reappeared.

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